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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL KPAL PGOV IS IT UNSC

SUBJECT: SHARON'S VISIT TO ITALY: ISRAELIS ECSTATIC

REF: A. ROME 4484

1B. BRUSSELS 5294

Classified By: POL M/C FOR REASONS 1.5(b),(d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Israeli Ambassador Gol described Israeli PM Sharon's November 17-19 visit to Rome as "extraordinary" for its warmth and level of reception, in part due to the confluence of events -- the synagogue bombings in Istanbul and the state funerals for fallen Italian carabinieri and civilians in the Nasiriya attack -- and resulting shared grief. Even the center-left opposition he met with reportedly balanced their concerns on the fence and settlements with expressions of understanding of the terrorist threat faced by Israel. In public as well as in private, Sharon also raised the Italian EU Presidency as the best Israel has even known and called Italy the best friend Israel has in the EU. End summary.

¶2. (C) Israeli PM Sharon's November 17-19 visit to Rome included meetings with all of Italy's top political leaders, including President Ciampi, PM Berlusconi, Deputy PM Fini (who will be in Israel November 24-25), FM Frattini, Defense Minister Martino, Senate President Pera and Chamber President Casini. Sharon also met with principal opposition leaders, including Francesco Rutelli and Arturo Parisi (President and Vice President of the Daisy Party), Piero Fassino and Massimo D'Alema (Secretary and Honorary President of the Democrats of the Left), as well as the Italian Jewish community. The visit occurred just two days after the bombings of two synagogues in Istanbul and overlapped with the state funeral for the 19 Italian victims of the suicide attack on carabinieri headquarters in Nasiriya.

¶3. (C) Israeli Ambassador Gol told Pol M/C on 21 November that Sharon's visit was "extraordinary." Gol's DCM, Amos Radian, filled in the details, saying Sharon made the same points privately that he did during his few public statements during the visit. Radian said that the Italian MFA's prediction that Italy would have a tough message to deliver to Sharon was not borne out, a fact that he attributed to the confluence of tragic events in Istanbul and Nasiriya. Instead, the tough messages were left to EU FMs to deliver at the EU-Israel Association Council meeting in Brussels which, coincidentally, occurred at the same time as the monthly meeting of EU foreign ministers, and which was chaired by FM Frattini. Indeed, the Italian FM reportedly was very careful to distinguish EU from Italian policy in his discussions with Sharon. Radian was also struck by the fact that there were no public demonstrations in Rome against Sharon and no press criticism of how the Italian government handled the visit. Post will try to get an MFA read-out of the visit to report septel.

¶4. (C) Several specific topics came up repeatedly during Sharon's meetings:

-- the wall/fence: This issue was raised at every meeting, and Sharon responded that there are actually only nine kilometers of wall, with the rest being fence. Fences and walls, he said, can be taken down eventually. Human lives, however, cannot be restored. Also, Sharon reportedly added, the fence will benefit the Palestinian economy because it will enable Israel to admit bona fide workers and keep out terrorists. Sharon's oft repeated line that Israel will make compromises for peace but will not compromise security also went over well with his Italian interlocutors, and he reportedly got no push back after making these points. Responding to the Pope's call to "build bridges rather than walls" to achieve peace, Sharon retorted that bridges can't

be built on the bodies of the victims of terrorist attacks.

-- the Geneva informal settlement agreement: This issue also was raised by each of Sharon's interlocutors. Sharon's response was that the agreement had no legal standing and that it not only contradicts but detracts from the Road Map, which remains the Israeli focus. He emphasized to all that there can be no back channel negotiations. When conditions permit, he said, serious negotiations under the Road Map can begin. Radian said Sharon was concerned about an initiative in the Italian parliament to endorse the agreement.

-- Arafat: As necessary, Sharon made it clear that Israel

did not intend to take any action against the Palestinian leader other than to keep him penned up in Ramallah. FM Frattini reportedly told Sharon that Israel should not boycott EU officials who meet with Arafat, but he did not press the issue. (Comment. Shalom reportedly told EU FMs in Brussels that Israel would end its boycott on EU Special Representative Marc Otte -- see Ref B).

-- EU Action against Israel: Referring to suggestions within the EU regarding economic actions against Israel, Frattini told Sharon unconditionally that Italy would never permit that to happen. (Comment. This position is not just about Israel per se, but about avoiding a slippery slope that would bring the EU to take similar actions against other countries that Italy cares about, e.g. Libya, Iran, and Syria.)

-- Sharon also discussed Iran's nuclear program with FM Frattini. According to Radian, Sharon's public statements once again reflected his private conversation with his Italian counterpart, which expressed great concern given Israel's current relationship with Iran. Frattini reportedly assured Sharon that the EU expects Iran to sign the Additional Protocol and especially expects a lot of transparency on Tehran's past regarding the freeze of nuclear enrichment activities.

15. (C) Radian took as a positive sign the fact that Berlusconi did not raise the point he had raised during all previous meetings with his Israeli visitors -- that if Israel refrained from retaliating after terrorist attacks, it would win respect from Palestinians and the international community. According to Radian, Berlusconi now understands that Israeli public opinion demands a response to every attack.

16. (C) During a meeting with the leaders of Italy's main opposition parties, current Democrats of the Left leader Piero Fassino, instead of criticism, served up a series of not-so-difficult questions. Daisy leader Francesco Rutelli and DS Honorary President Massimo D'Alema were more critical, but even they were not especially forceful or persistent.

17. (C) Sharon both publicly and privately described Italy as Israel's best friend in the EU and the Italian EU Presidency as the most balanced that Israel has ever seen. Radian said, however, that the Israel government expects new EU demarches starting on January 1 (when Ireland takes over the EU Presidency).

18. (C) Deputy PM Gianfranco Fini will get an extra warm welcome when he visits Israel November 24-25, where he will meet with top Israeli leaders, including PM Sharon, FM Shalom, and the head of the Knesset. It is important for both sides that Fini's visit be seen as a critical step in removing the stigma attached to Fini's National Alliance (AN) party because of its Fascist roots (see Ref A). Israel sees Fini as a future Italian PM and wants to build bridges with him now.

19. (C) Before Sharon's visit, other EU embassies were apprehensive that Berlusconi's public statements would undercut the "EU" agreed policy towards Israel, much like what happened during the EU-Putin summit. As far as we can tell, Berlusconi didn't say anything publicly that the other EU states would object to, but nor did he press as strongly the other points they would have liked him to make regarding settlements, the fence, and Arafat.

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